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Mikhail Gorbachev explains what's rotten in Russia

In a rare interview, the former Soviet leader says glasnost is working, but globalization isn't.

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TOPICS: ENVIRONMENT, GLOBALIZATION, COMMUNISM, RUSSIA, NEWS



Mikhail Gorbachev has a new mission: saving the world's environment. In an interview at the State of the World Forum in New York Tuesday, the former leader of the Soviet Union said, "I think the environmental problem will be the number one item on the agenda of the 21st century ... This is a problem that cannot be postponed."

Gorbachev linked the planet's worsening health to globalization and the growing gap between rich and poor it has produced. But he emphasized, "We cannot just criticize, cannot just blame. We should try to understand what is happening and what we need to

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The former Soviet leader also spoke at length about Russian President Vladimir Putin, rebutting criticisms that Putin is returning Russia to authoritarianism and crippling the nation's environmental regulations. After the two men met this summer, at Putin's invitation, Gorbachev had praised Putin for restoring “order” in Russia.

In Tuesday's interview with Salon and National Public Radio's “Living on Earth,” Gorbachev stood by his comment, asserting that Putin is “in favor of laws and courts being effective, because in the chaos that existed in Russia under Yeltsin ... dishonest people ... appropriated a lot of property.”

✓ Gorbachev added that he had criticized Putin's handling of the Kursk nuclear submarine tragedy, and that the public and media outcry against Putin left Gorbachev “rubbing his hands” with satisfaction that “glasnost is working after all.” As for Putin's abolition of Russia's environmental protection agency and persecution of environmental dissident Alexandr Nikitin and other green activists, Gorbachev said Putin had made a mistake. “I believe that decision will be reconsidered,” he said. ?

Gorbachev was in New York to address the United Nations Millennium Summit and to preside over the annual gathering of the State of the World Forum, an organization of politicians, activists, scientists and business leaders that Gorbachev founded in 1995 to address such global problems as environmental sustainability and poverty. He also heads the Green Cross International, a global environmental organization that works toward sustainable development. Globalization is the theme of this year's forum, and Gorbachev chaired an opening session that included financier and philanthropist George Soros and AFL-CIO president John Sweeney.

Except for a few more wrinkles around the eyes, Gorbachev looks little changed from the late 1980s, when he astonished the world by dismantling Soviet totalitarianism, ending the Cold War and reversing the nuclear arms race before being driven from power following a failed military coup in 1991. Striding down the corridor of the Hilton to the interview suite, he was surrounded by half a dozen aides and security men. Yet it was his aura of calm authority that commanded attention.

Dressed in a gray pin-striped business suit with matching shirt and tie, Gorbachev looked healthy and fit, with no apparent aftereffects of the devastating loss of his wife and political confidant, Raisa, to cancer last winter. His handshake was a firm, thick-fingered grasp that harked back to his peasant upbringing.

In his speech to the World Forum, Gorbachev argued that there is great public disappointment at the direction global affairs have taken since the end of the Cold War. [Wealthy nations and transnational corporations have benefited from globalization, he said, but 1 billion people now survive on less than \$1 a day. To reshape globalization, Gorbachev said, the forces of civil society should organize regular “people's forums” to work for alternative policies.

“As always,” he concluded, “I am optimistic.”

In the 1980s, you warned about the unprecedented dangers of nuclear weapons and took very daring steps to reverse the arms race. Have things gotten better or worse in the last 10 years? And do we need equally daring steps today to avert environmental degradation?

I would say that both threats are really extremely dangerous to mankind.

The environment has been greatly damaged by the nuclear arms race. Models made by Russian and American scientists showed that a nuclear war would result in a nuclear winter that would be extremely destructive to all life on Earth; the knowledge of that was a great stimulus to us, to people of honor and morality, to act in that situation.

Similarly regarding the environment, a great deal has changed in the world during the 20th century. Imagine, in the beginning of this century, the annual gross product created by all countries was worth \$60 billion. Today, \$60 billion is produced in one day, in 24 hours. Imagine the kind of overload that creates on the environment, the kind of heat and waste that is created.

All of that has damaged the environment already. We see that species are disappearing. We see that many areas of the world are no longer fit for human living. We see the death of forests, desertification, pollution of the oceans with nuclear waste and other kinds of waste.

My experience with the environment began many years ago when I was a small child. I grew up in a family of peasants, and it was there that I saw the way that, for example, our wheat fields suffered as a result of dust storms, water erosion and wind erosion, I saw the effect of that on life, on human life.

When I began to work in Moscow on the Central Committee, I saw a really terrible picture of the consequences of what we had done to the environment and a certain view of nature took shape for me, which was very important. Then I had to go through many other experiences, including Chernobyl.

In 1992, right after the Earth Summit, more than a hundred scientists from throughout the world, including dozens of Nobel Laureates met in Washington to discuss the Earth and the Earth Summit. Their verdict was very definite and merciless. They said that if the destructive trends continued, then within 30 or 40 years — and now 10 years have already passed — irreversible changes would begin to happen in the biosphere. That's a real threat.

If current technological processes continue without change, the environment will change and we, the human species, will either have to mutate or even die, to disappear, as many species have disappeared.

There are countries where a lot has changed in very practical terms — in environmental legislation, in the behavior of business, in the responsible behavior of people. I include here countries like the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium. I believe that over the past years, a lot has been done in the United States, too, even though there's still a lot of

years, it has been done in the United States, too, even though there is a lot of pollution here.

In Russia, which is going through a very difficult transformation, the possibility of environmental action is rather limited. Nevertheless, there is an environmental movement in Russia. During perestroika, when people had a chance to speak out for the first time in a democratic situation, the first thing they spoke for, the most massive rallies, were for the environment. It was also very important that the government began to respond to the demands of the people. During perestroika, we closed down 1,300 factories because of the damage that they did to the environment.

This is a problem that cannot be postponed. I think the environmental problem will be the No. 1 item on the agenda of the 21st century. If we just hope that we'll make it somehow, that nature will cope with these problems somehow through its own resources, and we can just do what we've been doing, we could face an even graver situation.

What, in very concrete, specific terms, can we do as a community of nations to solve this problem and the related problem of rich and poor? Is there something as imaginative as your unilateral moves on disarmament that could be transferred to the environmental field?

Global institutions must play a role here, particularly the United Nations.

Number one, we need to implement the Earth Charter, launched by [my organization] the Global Green Cross. This document took us six years to prepare. It's a very important declaration. Without shaping world public opinion, we will not be able to make sure that in every household, in every city, in every locality, people really remember to act on the environmental imperative.

So the shaping of a new set of values, a value shift, is extremely important. People first need to understand. Then, based on this awareness, they will be able to behave in everyday life in accordance with that. Those who think that the answer is just changing the laws, that's a mistake. I emphasize environmental education.

I also think that the media needs to write about these issues at all levels, from very local, small newspapers, all the way to national newspapers and television. I appreciate so much the initiative of Ted Turner, with whom we have started working this year on some kind of daily presence of the environmental concerns. Every day, there's something about the environment and every week a major program on the environment on CNN.

Also very important, there is a draft convention on the environment that was drawn up years before the Earth Charter and submitted to the United Nations. But not one nation has decided to sponsor that convention. The ideas that inspired us in the Earth Charter are shaped there in the form of international law, based on which national legislation could be adopted. Also in the international court at The Hague, we could have an environmental tribunal that would take charge of implementation of that convention.

We should also encourage the business community to work on the environment. We need to give recognition to environmentally clean products. We need to protect water — a

deficit of safe drinking water is now a problem in many regions.

In Russia, with its vast open spaces, with its tremendous natural wealth, rivers and forests, for many years we had the philosophy of unlimited resources, everything is so plentiful. Now we understand that everything is in short supply.

Putin recently abolished Russia's state committee for environmental protection. His government has apparently been harassing environmental activists. The government also wants to change the laws to allow the import of nuclear waste. All of this suggests that Putin believes there is no serious environmental crisis in Russia today. What is your own view?

Right now, air pollution in Russia has decreased because almost half of our industry has been virtually destroyed. That's the only positive result of what's happened in recent years to our economy. I think that more will be done for the environment as our economy improves.

Russia needs help to do away with dangerous hotspots that pose environmental danger. Russia needs to clean up the Kola Peninsula where there are old nuclear submarines. I had a meeting with Minister of Atomic Energy [Yevgeny] Adamov, who is looking forward to working with other countries, including Nordic countries, on this.

About Putin, I think it was indeed a mistake he made. They wanted to reduce the bureaucratic organizations, and one mistake they made was incorporating the committee on the environment into the Ministry of Natural Resources. One might think that there is some logic to that decision. I don't think so. I believe that decision will be reconsidered. I believe it will be changed. I believe the people — not just environmentalists — are concerned about this.

But this mistake was not made because Putin ignores the environment, or doesn't understand that Russia is facing an environmental problem, or wants to fight against the environmentalists. No, that would not be a serious thing to say.

You say this situation will be changed. Will it be changed because of the national referendum that activists are now organizing to overturn Putin's decree?

No, I don't think it'll take a referendum.

You think Putin will do it himself?

The problem can be solved. The environmentalists have a right to demand a referendum, but it's just a form of pressure on the government that needs to be applied. On this issue, I am on the side of the environmentalists.

What about the case of Alexandr Nikitin, the environmentalist who blew the whistle on the Russian navy's dumping of radioactive submarine reactors on the Kola Peninsula? The Putin government, as I'm sure you well know, is seeking permission from the Russian Supreme Court to re-prosecute Nikitin next week, on the absurd grounds that they violated his civil rights the first time they tried to convict him. This seems to send a message that environmental activism is not welcome in Russia.

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I know this matter only in terms of the basics. I believe that some of the Russian institutions are going overboard on this issue and we must help them to put an end to this prosecution. Perhaps some government secrets were affected, but we are dealing here with a storage base for old submarines. I don't think that's a secret; all of us know it exists. I'm not really familiar with the details, but it seems to me that someone is aggravating that matter.

Some observers have looked at the apparent harassment of Nikitin, and the fact that Putin used to run the Federal Security Police (Russia's recast KGB), and concluded that democracy is very much under threat in Russia — not just in the environmental area, but in general. The Western press reported that you met with Putin and afterwards praised him for restoring order to Russia. Is that true? And is there any contradiction between that and his apparent harassment of Nikitin and other environmentalists?

I don't see any contradiction. If there is a contradiction, well, life is sometimes contradictory.

When I met with Putin, I put a number of very direct questions to him. I asked him, 'Do you know that in our society and also in the media a lot of concerns are being expressed that you are trying to create a new authoritarian regime, that Putin will be a new [Yuri] Andropov, that Putin like Andropov wants to rule with a strong hand?' He rejected these concerns. He said he was very much against returning to the past, returning to the Communist system. He wants liberal reforms to take place in the country.

As regards his position on law and order, he said, 'I am in favor of a legal order. I'm in favor of laws and courts being effective, because in the kind of chaos that existed in Russia under Yeltsin, we had a situation of total disorder and arbitrary rule, and that was used by certain people, dishonest people.' So, when Putin speaks about order, he means we should combat that kind of lawlessness and crime and those people who appropriated a lot of property — they too need to be dealt with. The Russian people support that.

The press often criticizes Putin, but people support action against organized crime, against corruption, against bribery. Unless Russia addresses this, Russia cannot succeed. What Yeltsin did resulted in a merger of corrupt elements of society with the government and business. Many people in government were promoted by Mafia-like structures. That is why I do support steps that are being taken, and I support Putin's position on this.

At the same time, I criticized Putin on a number of occasions. I criticized his behavior during the nuclear submarine situation. It was a mistake for him to act so late. It's interesting that the Russian society reacted so acutely to this — not just the media, but public opinion, too, reacted to that kind of behavior.

And the president found it very difficult. We saw how Putin aged 10 years in just a few days. It was a difficult time for him. He's responsive, he's sensitive, he wants to look positive to people. And when he looked so stupid at a certain point — he probably had been misinformed, I must say — he made some accusations against the press, this is true.

But this is because the press went overboard a little bit in criticizing the president. I believe there should be some limit to this.

The entire situation showed our people have a voice and a character, that they will not yield their rights and freedoms. And the media, too. Even though it was sometimes overly emotional, generally I would say that the press acted properly, the press forced the authorities to give information in the end. [It left me] rubbing my hands, I was saying, "Glasnost is working, it is working after all." Generally, I would say that Putin is committed to democracy, that he would like to help create real democratic political parties during his time as president. That would be a great success. I think Putin takes a very open-minded stand towards the West. He wants a constructive relation with the West.

He will be submitting to the state Duma a number of draft laws on the protection of investors and private property, on support for entrepreneurship. But all of us, both you here and those of us in Russia, should bear in mind that we cannot immediately apply all the Western criteria of democracy to Russia. Russia needs to go a long way to reach normal democracy.